

TITLE OF REPORT: HITCHIN COMMUNITY SURGERIES UPDATE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF STRATEGY AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 To seek the Committee's agreement on the most effective way of handling enquiries raised at the monthly Community Surgeries – ensuring that any process agreed meets the needs of residents, Members and Officers.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Hitchin Community Surgery takes place on the first Saturday of every month.
- 3.2 Any enquiries raised via the Surgeries are noted at the time and passed back to officers of the Council to be dealt with.
- 3.3 A review of the process has been undertaken to ensure that Members receive timely, consistent and meaningful information as to the nature of these enquiries and how the Council has dealt with them.

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 It can sometimes be difficult for Customer Service Officers to handle these enquiries in a professional manner – this would typically be because vital information is not recorded on the enquiry form when the resident has raised the query. Amongst other things, this can result in the Council being unable to contact a resident or perhaps being unable to disclose information to a Member as the resident has not provided a signed authority allowing this.

Action – Support Officer to ensure that the enquiry form is fully completed and carries the signature of the resident.

- 4.2 There is an inconsistent approach as to the information Members receive following the Surgery. The Customer Service Centre currently sends copies of acknowledgement letters to Members but, when viewed in isolation, these are not meaningful. There is also inconsistency as to which Members receive this information – with some Officers sending copy correspondence to the Members in attendance at the Surgery and others sending to the relevant Ward Councillors.
- Action** – All Hitchin Members to continue to receive a summary of the enquiries raised at the Surgeries (via Committee Section), with copies of any correspondence only being sent to the relevant Ward Councillors.

- 4.3 A proportion of the enquiries received at the Surgery do not relate to District Council services and therefore need to be passed on to third parties to be dealt with. The Customer Service Officer will log any such enquiry with the relevant organisation on behalf of the resident where possible, as some organisations require direct contact from a resident. The Customer Service Officer will write to the resident and advise them as to where the enquiry has been logged, providing a reference number, if available, and details of how to contact the third party directly if required. Although we do, and will continue, to request that the third party sends a copy of any response to the Councillor we have no way of guaranteeing that this will happen.

At the moment, Members are sent details of where the enquiry has been logged but, once again, this can be inconsistent and when viewed as standalone items, these acknowledgements are not always useful.

Action - The Customer Services Manager will provide a summary of what enquiries have been logged and with whom. This summary will contain confirmation of an acknowledgement to the resident.

It is proposed that this summary will contain information relating to all enquiries logged – not just third parties – and will be a useful way for Members and Officers to gain an overview of the issues as well as allowing us to identify trends and areas for improvement.

This will be issued to all Hitchin Members once the enquires have been logged via Committee Section. A new and simple reporting template has been produced to capture this information.

Please see Appendix A .

- 4.4 In order to improve the consistency of information provided to residents there will be opportunities for Officers to provide Members with guidance on who and how best to sign post an enquiry that relates to a third party.

Action–The Customer Services Manager to undertake quarterly reviews of comments raised at Surgeries, identify common themes relating to third parties and, where appropriate, provide Members with guidance as to how to assist residents with these at the time of the Surgery.

- 4.5 The agreed system needs to be consistently applied.

Action – The Customer Services Manager has drafted detailed procedure notes to be shared with all relevant Officers to ensure timescales, and roles and responsibilities are understood and can be communicated clearly. These will be revised as necessary following this meeting and then be formally adopted for use.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Some of the enquiries raised at Surgeries will be classed as complaints. There is no legal requirement to operate a complaints system. However, the legal consequence of failing to address a complaint through the 3Cs procedure could be significant. Best practice illustrates that complaints dealt with at an early stage reduce escalation, potentially to a legal claim.

- 5.2 Customers have the right to ask the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) to investigate a complaint. The LGO prefers that a complaint should first be dealt with through the Council's complaint procedure. However, if the complaint is sufficiently serious, the LGO can choose to investigate immediately. An explanatory leaflet 'How to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman' is available at all Council reception desks stating which complaints the LGO can and cannot investigate.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The above proposed actions can be managed from existing staff resources so there are no budget implications arising from the officer's recommendations.
- 6.2 Claims for damages and compensation could be significant should the 3Cs procedure not be followed. Any costs related to complaints are covered within existing budgets.
- 6.3 If the Council fails to follow the 3Cs procedure a justified complaint may not be resolved, causing further complaint to the Ombudsman and negative press coverage damaging our reputation as a council, not just a single service.
- 6.3 NHDC's strategic objective is 'Ensuring that we listen to our citizens and deliver high quality, value for money, customer focused services'. Managing the 3Cs system efficiently is vital to achieving this target.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The work outlined in the new procedure forms part of the Officers existing roles and responsibilities so can be absorbed. There are, therefore, no human resource or equalities implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 At a meeting on 17 March 2008 attended by Cllr David Billing, Lynn Saville, Head of Strategy and Customer Services, and Amanda Phillips, Customer Services Manager, the weaknesses of the current system were discussed and agreement reached that proposals for improvement would be brought to this committee.
- 8.2 At a meeting on 28 April 2008 Amanda Phillips met with Nigel Schofield to review the current system and agreed on the proposals to be presented to this committee.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That the Committee read, note and comment on this proposed change as outlined by the action points in section 4 of this report.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To ensure a consistent, timely and professional approach to dealing with enquiries raised at the Hitchin Community Surgery.

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix A – Customer Services Manager Summary Report for Members
HITCHIN (3.6.08)

12. CONTACT OFFICERS

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13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None



APPENDIX A

HITCHIN COMMUNITY SURGERY – SUMMARY OF ISSUES AND ACTION BY THE CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

Insert date of Surgery

Ward	Resident Name	Summary of Issue	Dealt with by	Ack to resident	Reference Number

Where we have a signed authority from a resident we have requested that Ward Councillors are copied in on the formal response to any query.